



# Business profile: Loyola MBA grads launch marketing and communications company

By Jennifer Williams

*jwilliams@catholicreview.org*

Katie Baird Johnson and Karen Sterling are no strangers to the corporate world. But as wives and mothers, they had a desire to strike more of a balance in life while also fulfilling career goals. The pair, who met while working for BP, teamed up to develop a business plan and launch their marketing and communications firm, Johnson Sterling, in the summer of 2011. Already enjoying working with a number of clients, Katie and Karen share their story in the following Q&A.

 **Katie Johnson**, 31, is a Baltimore native who received both her undergraduate degree and MBA from Loyola University Maryland. She worked for BP in their marketing department and then for Black and Decker (now Stanley Black and Decker) for five and a half years.

 **Karen Sterling**, 39, is an Ohio native who graduated from Miami University, and then earned her MBA from Loyola University Maryland. She worked at BP for 12 years as both a marketing and communications manager.

**Q:** What drew you to create your own business?

**A:** Katie: For me it was a blend of a lot of different factors – the biggest factors being my family and how I was trying to be a mother and a wife and trying to maintain a career. But also my career aspirations throughout the large corporations I worked for were to be a bit more independent and to manage all sorts of marketing and not just one aspect. I found that, in my experience, at big companies you tend to get into a specific role and focus on a specific aspect of marketing versus having your hands in everything from PR to advertising to promotional marketing as well as viral and social marketing. So this is allowing me to be a mom, have a career, but most importantly to take a broader step into marketing, and really get my hands in and experience all aspects of it.

Karen: I did work fulltime in corporate America with my first child, and it was very difficult to feel like I was being good at doing my job and doing a good job (as a mom) and spending enough time with my son. So I took a break and decided to do something more flexible. But I also still wanted to go back to doing something a little more for me. So I thought of focusing on small businesses, after speaking to several friends of ours who own their own companies, and discovering there was really a need for people to help them with marketing efforts. They don't necessarily have the wherewithal and resources to do their own marketing and hire a fulltime staff. So I'm willing and able to help anybody as much as we can. It's actually very satisfying, more than I thought, to help many businesses at once.

Katie: As a team when we went into this, our joint vision and goal is to do exactly that. To offer all sorts of companies either the help they didn't think they could get or afford or make time for. So it has been really fun.

**Q:** What steps did you take to procure clients?

**A:** Karen: It's kind of an ever-evolving process. The first thing we did was reach out to our personal and professional networks – people we have done business with in the past and former colleagues, and we joined some networking groups. Basically we reached out to anyone and everyone we know and said this is what we're doing, if you know of anybody, let us know.

**Q:** As wives and working mothers how are you able to maintain the focus and self-discipline necessary to run your own company?

**A:** Katie: I'm still new at this – being a mom – but I have to say it's all about feeling like you have a balance. I don't think a true balance can ever really be in place, but at least attempting to have one. Our business model is to make sure that the number one priority is our family, so if we have to shuffle things around, share a project or shift workloads, we make those changes so we do have the ability to get home in time for dinner or make sure if there's a doctor's appointment or other personal things going on, we support each other.

Karen: You have to prioritize both personally and professionally and communicate everything that's going on because that's the only way to make sure no balls get dropped.

Katie: We never say to our clients, "Oh, I was planning to take so-and-so to the playground at that time."

I don't think I've ever worked as hard because I've got my heart and soul in it, and it's just so rewarding.

Karen: It's much more personal.

**Q:** What would you say is the most unexpected thing that has come from this venture?

**A:** Katie: I didn't realize how much I didn't know because larger corporations such as Black and Decker and BP offer such a wide variety of training and resources, but you're so focused on one aspect. I thought I was at a point where I could manage a marketing team or I could pretty much do anything in marketing, but some of the stuff our clients are asking, I'm looking at Karen and saying, "Have you ever done this before?" And most times the answer is yes, but other times we have to team together and figure this out.

Karen: For me, I've never considered myself to be entrepreneurial, you know when I went to business school, I never thought I was going to go out and start my own business, but for me, it's the desire to be flexible and set my own schedule to define the rules myself and with Katie. The most satisfying part is helping several businesses at once and the ability to help other companies be successful.

**Q:** Can you tell us anything about the success of your company so far and any future plans?

**A:**Karen: I would say at six months we have landed half a dozen clients we are

working very hard for, with half a dozen more that we're starting to form a relationship with. I think that for the first six months, that's a pretty good track record.

Katie: As far as specific feedback from clients, we've gotten "You're really helping us. If you weren't in place, these types of projects would never be done or would take a long time."

**Q:** What is the one piece of advice you would give to someone starting his or her own company?

**A:** Karen: Have the confidence to do it. We thought it was much more daunting than it was. We took a lot of time to build a business plan, and really it came down to just getting out there and starting to talk to people and starting to create something and just doing it.

Katie: We started talking about this eight months prior. There's a lot of legwork. We came from different aspects ... this was the complete opposite side of the street for me, but we worked with a lawyer and did a lot of homework and now we're thankful we did take the time. If you're going to have a partner or have some sort of team or network, you have to really make sure you take the time to say "is this the right fit?" Go through "What if ?" scenarios. What really helped us go through that exercise was to go through the operating agreement and business plan. If you want to go out on your own, you only live once, so take a risk. It's worth it. It's such a good learning experience.

**Watch: Karen Sterling and Katie Baird Johnson talk about their business:**

